

Freedom of Information Act 2000 (FOIA) Decision notice

Date: 13 November 2017

Public Authority: Department for Education

Address: Sanctuary Buildings

Great Smith Street

London SW1P 3BT

Decision (including any steps ordered)

- 1. The complainant has requested agendas and minutes from Department for Education (DfE) Board papers for a certain time period. The DfE disclosed some information from the agendas and minutes but refused the majority on the basis of section 36(2)(b)(i), (ii), (2)c) and 40(2).
- 2. The Commissioner's decision is that the DfE has correctly withheld information from the minutes under section 36(2)(b) and the names of junior officials from the agendas under section 40(2). However, she finds that the information in the agendas that has been withheld does engaged section 36(2)(c) but the public interest favours disclosure.
- 3. The Commissioner requires the public authority to take the following steps to ensure compliance with the legislation.
 - Disclose the information in the agendas that has been incorrectly withheld under section 36(2)(c).
- 4. The public authority must take these steps within 35 calendar days of the date of this decision notice. Failure to comply may result in the Commissioner making written certification of this fact to the High Court pursuant to section 54 of the Act and may be dealt with as a contempt of court.

Request and response



5. On 20 July 2016, the complainant wrote to the Department for Education ("DfE") and requested information in the following terms:

"Please supply electronic copies of the Department for Education board papers ie agendas and minutes – for all meetings from 27 January 2015 to date. Please include the agendas and minutes for any extraordinary meetings.

Please supply full agendas and minutes for all meetings please – not summaries of them."

- 6. The DfE responded on 18 August 2016. It stated that it held the requested information but considered that section 36 of the FOIA applied and it therefore required additional time to consider the public interest test. A further response was sent on 19 September 2016 attaching copies of all the agenda items (and presenters) for the meetings held in the specified time period. The DfE withheld the remaining information under sections 36(2)(b)(i), b(ii) and (c) of the FOIA and concluded the balance of the public interest favoured maintaining the exemption and withholding the information.
- 7. Following an internal review the DfE wrote to the complainant on 20 January 2017. It stated that it had re-assessed the information and determined some additional information could be disclosed. However, the DfE still sought to rely on the exemptions at section 36 to withhold the majority of the information and also clarified section 40 had been applied to withhold the names of junior civil servants.
- 8. During the course of the Commissioner's investigation the DfE accepted there was additional information it could disclose. However, it still withheld the majority of the minutes on the basis of section 36.

Scope of the case

- 9. The complainant contacted the Commissioner on 24 January 2017 to complain about the way her request for information had been handled.
- 10. The Commissioner considers the scope of her investigation to be to determine if the DfE has correctly applied the provisions of section 36(2)(b)(i), b(ii), (c) or 40(2) to withhold the remaining information from the requested minutes and, if so, where the balance of the public interest lies.

Reasons for decision



Section 36 - prejudice to the effective conduct of public affairs

- 11. The DfE considers that sections 36(2)(b)(i) and (ii) and 2(c) are engaged in relation to the information it holds. The Commissioner has viewed this information and notes that it is the majority of the minutes for each of the meetings (with the exception of the meeting of 20 July 2016 as no minutes existed at the time of the request) and certain agenda items for the meetings. The dates of the meetings were: 27 January 2015; 9 June 2015; 14 July 2015; 9 December 2015; 10 February 2016; 10 May 2016 and 20 July 2016.
- 12. The DfE applied section 36(2)(b)(i) and (ii) to withhold the minutes and section 36(2)(c) as an alternative to withhold all of the remaining information in the minutes and the agendas.
- 13. Section 36(2)(b)(i) states that information is exempt from disclosure if, in the reasonable opinion of the qualified person, its disclosure would, or would be likely to inhibit the free and frank provision of advice.
- 14. Section 36(2)(b)(ii) states that information is exempt from disclosure if, in the reasonable opinion of the qualified person, its disclosure would, or would be likely to inhibit the free and frank exchange of views for the purposes of deliberation. Section 36(2)(c), on the other hand, refers to the prejudice that may otherwise occur through the release of the requested information. If section 36(2)(c) is used in conjunction with any other exemption in section 36(2), the prejudice envisaged must be different to that covered by the other exemption. In previous cases the Information Tribunal has found that the exemption may potentially apply to circumstances where disclosure could disrupt a public authority's ability to offer an effective public service.
- 15. In determining whether any of these limbs of the exemption has been correctly engaged, the Commissioner is required to consider the qualified person's opinion as well as the reasoning that informed the opinion. Therefore the Commissioner must:
 - Ascertain who the qualified person is,
 - Establish that they gave an opinion,
 - Ascertain when the opinion was given, and
 - Consider whether the opinion was reasonable.
- 16. The DfE has explained that for the purposes of section 36 its qualified person is its Permanent Secretary. In this case the opinion was provided by the DfE's Permanent Secretary and the Commissioner is satisfied this was the qualified person at the time the request was made. The DfE has



explained that the qualified person was provided with the withheld information as well as the arguments both for and against disclosure.

- 17. The qualified person may apply the exemption on the basis that the prejudice to the relevant interests protected by 2(b) & (c) either 'would' occur or 'would be likely' to occur. This means that there are two possible limbs upon which the exemption can be engaged.
- 18. The term 'likely' to inhibit is interpreted as meaning that the chance of any inhibition or prejudice should be more than a hypothetical possibility; there must be a real and significant risk. The alternative limb of 'would' inhibit is interpreted as meaning that the qualified person considers it is more likely than not that the inhibition or prejudice would occur.
- 19. The qualified person has stated that her opinion is that the prejudice 'would be likely' to occur. It is on this basis that the Commissioner will consider whether the qualified person's opinion is reasonable.
- 20. When considering whether the opinion is reasonable the Commissioner is not required to determine whether it is the only reasonable opinion that can be held on the subject. It is quite possible for two people to hold differing views on the same issue, both of which are reasonable. Nor is it necessary for the Commissioner to agree with the qualified person's opinion.

Section 36(2)(b)(i) and (ii) – prejudice to the free and frank provision of advice and exchange of views for the purposes of deliberations

- 21. The DfE has argued that it is important for Board meetings to remain a safe space where Ministers, non-executive board members (NEBMs) and officials can give their open and honest views. The minutes document both verbal advice given to the board by officials and allude to written advice provided in advance. The DfE also states the minutes contain the views of attendees on a range of sensitive topics and it is important that attendees feel able to give their straightforward comments and views without disproportionate consideration of caveats or unnecessarily articulating aloud facts that are well known to attendees.
- 22. The qualified person accepted that the full minutes of the Board meetings were regularly released there would be a risk that the content of the meeting could be biased towards "putting things on the record" and away from the discussion of new ideas. This could lead to poorer strategic oversight of the Department and to a chilling effect on discussions in meetings and the specificity of minutes in the future.



- 23. The qualified person also recognised that Board meetings are a relatively rare occasion where Ministers, NEBMs and senior officials are able to meet in one place to discuss the Department's most pressing concerns or to discuss issues that are highly strategic. It is argued that much of minutes contain sensitive information relating to the DfE's key risks and priorities and releasing this information could contribute to those risks materialising by affecting public confidence or having unintended consequences on behaviour.
- 24. Additionally it is argued that several of the documents describe discussions regarding the DfE's strategy with the education sector. The qualified person is of the view that the DfE needs to be able to debate how best to communicate effectively with relevant sectors and releasing minutes containing discussions on communications would be counterproductive to delivering a clear and consistent narrative and it is therefore necessary to protect discussions around the most effective form of communication.
- 25. The Commissioner therefore understands the view of the qualified person is that disclosure of the information in the minutes at the time of the request would have been likely to have inhibited not only the free and frank provision of advice in the future but also the free and frank exchange of views for the purposes of deliberations in order to inform strategic decisions.
- 26. The Commissioner recognises that disclosing the information could undermine the discussion of sensitive issues as individuals would be less free and frank in their commentaries if they believed their opinions would not be kept confidential. She has considered this in the context of the discussions that were taking place that were documented in the minutes and she accepts that the exchanges in these meeting were to assist in the Department reviewing its performance and setting its strategic objectives going forwards. As such the Commissioner is satisfied that sections 36(2)(b)(i) and (ii) are engaged, that the qualified person's opinion that the disclosure would be likely to inhibit the free and frank exchange of views for the purposes of deliberation and the free and frank provision of advice, is a reasonable one.
- 27. In light of the above the Commissioner is satisfied that the opinion of the qualified person is a reasonable one and that therefore the exemptions provided by sections 36(2)(b)(i) and (ii) are engaged.

The public interest test

28. Section 36 is subject to the public interest test. This means that the requested information can only be withheld if, in all the circumstances of the case, the public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighs the



public interest in disclosure. In assessing the public interest in maintaining the section 36(2)(b) exemption the Commissioner will consider the impact on the DfE's ability to freely and frankly exchange views and offer advice to drive the Department forwards.

Public interest arguments in favour of disclosure

- 29. The DfE acknowledges there is a public interest in disclosing information that leads to greater accountability, improved trust and an improved standard of public debate.
- 30. The complainant argues that the DfE's publication scheme covers the DfE itself and its executive agencies and the Commissioner's guidance for government departments on publication schemes states that "we would expect management board minutes ... to be readily available. This excludes information which is properly regarded as private to the meeting."
- 31. The complainant also argues that the minutes and agendas requested were dated between 27 January 2015 and 20 July 2016 and considerable time has elapsed since then making all of the information less sensitive as it relates to activities of a previous Parliament so any space needed by policy makers to scrutinise and 'hammer out' policy is no longer relevant.

Public interest arguments in favour of maintaining the exemption

- 32. The DfE argues that it is essential that ministers are able to commission and discuss advice on a range of issues without worrying about the public presentation of these commissions or the subsequent discussions. It is also the case that good government depends on good decision—making and this needs to be based on the best advice available and a full consideration of the options.
- 33. The DfE further states that it is clear from the information withheld, that board members feel able to provide free and frank views and advice, due to the fact these exchanges were not intended to go into the public domain. However, should it make such information public the likely result is that future advice given by board members, as well as any issues and concerns raised, would be less candid, especially when discussing sensitive or high profile issues.
- 34. It considers that a robust and fair decision-making system relies on considering all points of view before reaching a reasoned conclusion. To do this, all parties should be able to speak freely and frankly and be able to challenge, to ensure that issues are debated widely and that decisions are based on broad and balanced evidence. If there is a risk that



sensitive discussions may be opened up to public scrutiny, ministers and board members may be less likely to enter openly into the decision making process, resulting in a reduction in quality of the final decision.

Balance of the public interest test arguments

- 35. Having seen the withheld information, the Commissioner must consider where the balance of the public interest lies. In doing so, she has taken into account the opinion of the qualified person that disclosure would cause the inhibition described, this carries a certain amount of weight through to the public interest test.
- 36. However, the exact weight that should be given to maintaining the exemption depends on the particular circumstances of the case. This means that whist the Commissioner accepts that a reasonable opinion has been expressed that inhibition would be likely to occur she will go on to consider the severity, extent and frequency of that inhibition to determine where the balance of the public interest lies.
- 37. The Commissioner notes there is a public interest inherent in section 36(2)(b), that being a prejudice-based exemption, in avoiding harm to the decision making process. She has taken into account that there is automatically some public interest in maintaining this exemption.
- 38. The main arguments advanced by the DfE relate to the concept of a 'chilling effect'. The chilling effect argument is that disclosure of information would inhibit free and frank discussions in the future and that the loss of frankness and candour would damage the quality of advice and deliberation and lead to poorer decision making.
- 39. The Commissioner's guidance on section 36¹ states that:

"Chilling effect arguments operate at various levels. If the issue in question is still live, arguments about a chilling effect on those ongoing discussions are likely to be most convincing. Arguments about the effect on closely related live issues may also be relevant. However, once the decision in question is finalised, chilling effect arguments become more and more speculative as time passes. It will be more difficult to make reasonable arguments about a generalised chilling effect on all future discussions."

¹ https://ico.org.uk/media/for-

organisations/documents/1175/section 36 prejudice to effective conduct of public affairs .pdf



- 40. The DfE has provided specific examples within the minutes which demonstrate the frankness and candour of the advice and opinions provided. These have been discussed in more detail in a confidential annex. The Commissioner accepts that this demonstrates the discussions taking place in these meetings are of strategic importance and therefore in determining where the public interest lies she has focused on two main issues whether the age of the information impacts on its importance and whether the information in the minutes can be exempted in full or should be disclosed with only the most sensitive information redacted.
- 41. In this case the minutes date back to 2015 and it is these minutes which are likely to be less likely to lead to the chilling effect that has been argued by the DfE as they relate to decisions and discussions taking place in a different Parliament. The more recent minutes from 2016 were, at the time of the request, still of relevance to the strategic decisions of the DfE. Therefore the chilling effect argument is much stronger as disclosing details of advice and discussions when strategic objectives are still being set is more likely to have the inhibitory effects described in the exemption.
- 42. The Commissioner has therefore focused on the earlier minutes and the whether or not disclosing information from these minutes would be in the public interest. She asked the DfE to specifically and explicitly explain why information in these minutes should be withheld given the passage of time and they have, as discussed in the confidential annex, been able to demonstrate that advice and views exchanges in these minutes related to sensitive issues still ongoing at the time of the request. Therefore, the Commissioner accepts a chilling effect would be likely to occur if the information were to be disclosed and at the very least it can be argued that disclosing this information might lead to a more cautious expression of views in the future.
- 43. The complainant has raised concerns that due to the age of some of the material it should not be withheld as any safe space needed to discuss policy is no longer relevant. However, the Commissioner must clarify that the DfE has not cited the 'safe space' argument in this case and instead has referred consistently to the chilling effect this would have on the provision of advice and exchange of views on strategic issues, not policy development, in the future. The Commissioner accepts that a chilling effect can still occur even where information is somewhat older as long as it can be demonstrated that there are still relevant matters ongoing and the DfE has done so in this case.
- 44. In terms of the complainant's concerns that not all of the information within the minutes would be sensitive enough or frank enough to engage the exemption; the Commissioner notes that although some of



the information may appear to more anodyne much of the information that did not constitute advice or frank views was provided to the complainant by the DfE and what has remained and been withheld is the information which the DfE has identified as being only that which contains advice or views from officials. The candour of the advice and views provided has been discussed in the confidential annex with specific examples from the minutes used to highlight this.

- 45. The Commissioner acknowledges the information in the minutes would shed some light on the decision-making process of the DfE and the ways in which it discusses and debates its strategy. This information would provide the public with an insight into the workings of the DfE at a senior strategic level and this would be in the public interest as it would increase openness and accountability.
- 46. The Commissioner has considered the public interest arguments presented in this case and has given due weight to the opinion of the qualified person and has considered the likely extent, frequency and severity of any impact of disclosure on the free and frank provision of advice and exchange of views for the purposes of deliberation.
- 47. It is clear that the board meetings are used by the Department to analyse performance and set strategic objectives by considering all potential issues likely to face the Department. This occurs by taking place in an environment where views can be freely exchanged and candid advice can be given. This is clearly shown in the minutes where there are numerous examples of advice being given by attendees. The DfE has sufficiently explained the potential chilling effect on future meetings and discussions should this information be disclosed and the Commissioner has accepted this to be a real and significant risk even where the information dates back to 2015 as much of the discussions were based on issues still relevant to the Department today.
- 48. The Commissioner has therefore concluded that in the circumstances of this case the public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighs the public interest in disclosure of the requested information and therefore the exemption at section 36(2)(b) has been correctly applied.

Section 36(2)(c) – otherwise prejudice the effective conduct of public affairs

- 49. The DfE has applied section 36(2)(c) to withhold information from the agendas of the meetings.
- 50. The qualified person confirmed he considered the detailed wording of the agendas engaged section 36(2)(c) as the drafting of the agenda itself is frank and sometimes provocative to support frank and honest



debate. Disclosing this information would have a negative consequence on the effective conduct of public affairs by having a chilling effect on future drafting, impeding the quality of discussion.

- 51. The qualified person also argued the importance of the Board Secretariat being able to create agendas that are fit for purpose to make the best us of the people in the room. This involves identifying items that would benefit the scrutiny of the board but also presenting these in a way that generates helpful and honest debate. The qualified person argued that if the agendas of meetings were regularly released this could influence which items were included on the agenda and the way in which they are presented. For example, it could lead to pressure to include items for the purpose of outwardly demonstrating importance rather than because they are a topic to which the board can add a lot of value. It could also influence the secretariat to include only minimal information on the agenda leading to less focused and less informed discussion.
- 52. The Commissioner has to reach a view on whether this opinion is reasonable. To determine this it is only necessary to conclude that the opinion is not irrational or absurd and she has taken the view in previous cases that an opinion that disclosing information that might have a chilling effect on a public authority can be a reasonable opinion.
- 53. It is not unreasonable to believe that disclosing the information would result in changes to the way agendas are drafted in the future; it follows therefore that the Commissioner must accept the opinion is a reasonable one and that section 36(2)(c) is engaged.

Public interest arguments in favour of disclosure

54. The public interest arguments in favour of disclosure are broadly the same as those set out for the section 36(2)(b) exemption.

Public interest arguments in favour of maintaining the exemption

- 55. The DfE states that it relies on information provided by board members and officials to help make informed decisions in order to determine the appropriate level of action to take when developing the delivery of departmental objectives and any issues surrounding these. These deliberations need to remain confidential to ensure they are handled sensitively and effectively.
- 56. The DfE argues that disclosing this information would be likely to prejudice its ability to effectively deal with handling significant delivery and business issues. This could then lead to the DfE being unable to decide whether any issues or concerns raised require full and formal consideration and the redirection of limited resources to do so.



57. Further to this it is argued that board members and officials should feel confident they can share views with one another and they can challenge issues presented to them. Disclosing the information would remove the safe space within which officials are able to discuss options and deliver freely and frankly and it would make it more difficult for the DfE to work collaboratively and cohesively when delivering its core business.

Balance of the public interest test arguments

- 58. Having seen the withheld information, the Commissioner must consider where the balance of the public interest lies. In doing so, she has taken into account the opinion of the qualified person that disclosure would cause the prejudice described, this carries a certain amount of weight through to the public interest test.
- 59. However, as with the section 36(2)(b) exemption the exact weight that should be given to maintaining the exemption depends on the particular circumstances of the case. This means that whilst the Commissioner accepts that a reasonable opinion has been expressed that prejudice would be likely to occur she will go on to consider the severity, extent and frequency of that inhibition to determine where the balance of the public interest lies.
- 60. The Commissioner notes there is a public interest inherent in section 36(2)(c), that being a prejudice-based exemption, in avoiding harm to the workings of the public authority. She has taken into account that there is automatically some public interest in maintaining this exemption.
- 61. The Commissioner's guidance on section 36² states that:

"this category of exemption is intended to apply to those cases where it would be necessary in the interests of good government to withhold information ... and where the disclosure would prejudice the public authority's ability to offer an effective public service or to meet its wider objectives or purposes due to the disruption caused by the disclosure or the diversion of resources in managing the impact of the disclosure."

62. In this case the information that is being withheld under section 36(2)(c) is the information in the agendas of the meetings.

² https://ico.org.uk/media/fororganisations/documents/1175/section 36 prejudice to effective conduct of public affairs .pdf



- 63. The Commissioner notes that the majority of the arguments presented by the DfE in relation to this exemption refer to the safe space needed by officials and board members to share views with one another and challenge issues presented to them. The Commissioner acknowledges the importance of a safe space to do this but is not minded to accept that disclosing the agendas would inhibit this safe space.
- 64. The DfE argued that disclosing the agendas may have an impact on the drafting of the agendas in future and result in agendas being less descriptive about the issues up for discussion. Having viewed the agendas the Commissioner observes they are written to show the overall point up for discussion with a brief summary, usually one sentence, of what this point relates to. Whilst more descriptive than an agenda which simply states the agenda points are, for example, performance update or objective setting; the agendas do not go into any significant detail.
- 65. The Commissioner accepts that there is a small risk disclosure of the agendas may result in the agendas becoming less detailed and no more than bullet points but she also does not consider the level of detail is significant as they are currently drafted. It is equally as likely that officials who put forward points for the agendas and draft them will continue to do so in the manner they currently do in order to promote discussions when the meetings take place.
- 66. As has been noted the Commissioner acknowledges the information that has been withheld from the agendas is more than just a bullet point but it is also not overly detailed, it does not reveal anything about the Department's views or strategic direction that would affect the safe space needed by officials to discuss issues.
- 67. Balanced against this is a strong public interest in disclosure to provide the public with a better understanding of how the DfE operates and the issues it discusses that inform its strategy.
- 68. The Commissioner has considered the public interest arguments presented in this case and has given due weight to the opinion of the qualified person and has considered the likely extent, frequency and severity of any impact of disclosure on the DfE.
- 69. The Commissioner has concluded that in the circumstances of this case the public interest in maintaining the exemption does not outweigh the public interest in disclosure of the requested information and therefore the exemption at section 36(2)(c) has been incorrectly applied to withhold the information from the agendas.

Section 40(2) - third party personal data



- 70. Section 40(2) provides an exemption for information which is the personal data of any individual, other than the requester, where disclosure of that personal data would be in breach of any of the data protection principles.
- 71. In this case, the DfE only considers this exemption applicable to names of certain attendees at the meeting, specifically junior officials.
- 72. Personal data is defined in section 1(1) of the Data Protection Act 1998 (DPA) as:
 - "data which relate to a living individual who can be identified –

 (a) From those data, "
- 73. In this case as the information is the names of individuals it is clear that this information constitutes personal data for the purposes of section 1(1) of the DPA.
- 74. Personal data is exempt if either of the conditions set out in sections 40(3) and 40(4) of the FOIA are met. The relevant condition in this case is at section 40(3)(a)(i) where disclosure would breach any of the data protection principles. In this case the Commissioner has considered whether disclosure of the personal data would breach the first data protection principle. This states that "personal data shall be processed fairly and lawfully".

Likely expectations of the data subject

75. The Commissioner considers that more junior officials would not have had any reasonable expectation that their names and presence at these meetings would be disclosed into the public domain. The DfE has stated that more junior individuals are less likely to be in public roles so would have a lesser expectation of their names being disclosed. The Commissioner is also aware that it is not just the disclosure of the names that is the issue in this case, it will also reveal that the individual took part in these Board meetings and this may lead to scrutiny the individuals concerned would have had no reasonable expectation of.

Would disclosure cause damage or distress to the data subjects?

76. The Commissioner considers it can be difficult to quantify what damage and distress may be caused but in any event it is only necessary to show that there is a possibility of this happening. For much the same reasons as above, the Commissioner acknowledges there is a possibility of the individual concerned being distressed by the disclosure of their name and the fact they were involved in these meetings. More senior



officials in public facing roles would be aware that they have a lesser expectation of privacy but for more junior members of staff this is not the case. However, the information does relate to the work life of the individuals and not their private life so this does weaken the argument.

77. That being said, the Commissioner cannot discount the possibility of this information causing some distress to the individual involved by disclosing the individual had involvement in Board meetings where it may be perceived strategic priorities could have been decided on and set.

The legitimate public interest

- 78. The Commissioner considers that it is not clear how disclosing the name of an attendee at the meeting would be of any legitimate public interest. Taking into account the data subjects' likely expectations and the possibility of distress, as disclosure of the information withheld under section 40(2) would not to any great extent meet the legitimate public interest in this case, the Commissioner considers the exemption has been correctly applied in relation to the names the DfE has withheld from the agendas.
- 79. The Commissioner therefore accepts that section 40(2) has been correctly applied to withhold the names of junior officials from the agendas.



Right of appeal

80. Either party has the right to appeal against this decision notice to the First-tier Tribunal (Information Rights). Information about the appeals process may be obtained from:

First-tier Tribunal (Information Rights) GRC & GRP Tribunals, PO Box 9300, LEICESTER, LE1 8DJ

Tel: 0300 1234504 Fax: 0870 739 5836

Email: GRC@hmcts.gsi.gov.uk

Website: www.justice.gov.uk/tribunals/general-regulatory-

chamber

- 81. If you wish to appeal against a decision notice, you can obtain information on how to appeal along with the relevant forms from the Information Tribunal website.
- 82. Any Notice of Appeal should be served on the Tribunal within 28 (calendar) days of the date on which this decision notice is sent.

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Jill Hulley	
Senior Case Officer	
Information Commissioner's Office	

Signed

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